



## Focus: Fair & Effective Education Policy

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# What Students Need from the Biden Administration – IDRA Recommendations for Federal Education Policy Changes

by Morgan Craven, J.D.

Federal agencies are preparing for new leadership, staff and policy priorities of the Biden-Harris administration. IDRA urges incoming policymakers to adopt a number of federal education reforms listed below that will benefit historically-marginalized communities, including students of color, those from families with limited incomes, emergent bilingual students, those who face gender-based discrimination, and immigrant students.

### Ensure an Equitable Educational Response to COVID-19

COVID-19 has disrupted educational access for millions of students, schools and families across the country. IDRA recommends federal policymakers do the following.

- **Immediately allocate emergency relief funds to address projected revenue shortfalls that will impact public schools and colleges.** Federal relief funds can help states minimize or avoid cuts to education budgets. The U.S. Department of Education should use its own emergency (“rainy day”) funds, identify new and stable revenue sources for public education, and prioritize serving historically-marginalized students in its spending.
- **Immediately allocate emergency relief funds specifically to address new COVID-19 costs,** including those related to addressing learning gaps, the digital divide (connectivity, devices, digital literacy training), and physical safety of students and teachers.

- **Require and enforce supplemental – not supplanted – maintenance-of-effort and maintenance-of-equity provisions for all federal relief funds.** These requirements ensure state and local fund recipients do not shirk their responsibility to invest in public education. They also protect funding for students from families with limited incomes, emergent bilingual students, students with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness, and others who most need resources in their schools, especially if states cut their education budgets.
- **Give states flexibility and guidance to report assessment data based on formative assessment systems and other measures that do not penalize students and schools.** We must have information about how students are faring during COVID-19 to effectively address learning gaps, protect student civil rights and allocate sufficient resources. The U.S. Department of Education should allow states some flexibility to measure and report teaching and learning in different ways for the 2020-21 school year and should encourage them to develop statewide formative assessment systems to use beyond the pandemic.

### Provide Federal Resources Equitably and Incentivize Fair School Funding

Often, school funding formulae reinforce the inequitable distribution of resources to schools and rely on local property values and unstable state (*cont. on Page 2*)



### IDRA Recommendations for Federal Education Policy

IDRA urges incoming policymakers to adopt a number of federal education reforms listed below that will benefit historically-marginalized communities, including students of color, those from families with limited incomes, emergent bilingual students, those who face gender-based discrimination, and immigrant students.

-  **Ensure an Equitable Educational Response to COVID-19**
-  **Provide Federal Resources Equitably and Incentivize Fair School Funding**
-  **Foster Safe and Culturally-Sustaining Schools that Do Not Rely on Harmful Discipline and Policing**
-  **Ensure Excellent Educational Opportunities for Emergent Bilingual Students**
-  **Center Students and Families in Educational Leadership**

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(What Students Need from the Biden Administration, continued from Page 1)

revenue sources to fund schools. These factors exacerbate racial and socioeconomic segregation and perpetuate a long history of inequitable access to resources for students of color, students living in poverty and students' families. IDRA urges federal policymakers to do the following.

- **Increase funding for Title I of the Every Student Succeeds Act** so that schools have access to materials, training and other resources to ensure excellent educational opportunities for all students. An increase in Title I funding should be coupled with an equity-focused review of current distribution formulae and robust, up-to-date guidance from the U.S. Department of Education.

### **Foster Safe and Culturally-Sustaining Schools that Do Not Rely on Harmful Discipline and Policing**

The federal government should actively pursue changes to federal guidance, funding, data collection, and civil rights investigations and enforcement to protect students and foster safe and culturally-sustaining school climates. Federal policymakers should do the following.

- **Issue a revised version of the 2014 school discipline guidance issued by the Obama administration.**
- **Reject the findings of the Trump administration's school safety commission** that inappropriately and inaccurately claimed incidents of targeted school violence were linked to efforts to reduce use of exclusionary school discipline and policing.
- **Direct federal departments charged with addressing violations of students' civil rights to adopt robust complaint investigation procedures.** These departments must pursue investigations thoroughly, including in cases in which a school or education agency's

policies and practices have had a disparate impact on students of color or other historically-marginalized groups.

- **Increase funding for the people, personnel, and programs and practices that create safe and culturally-sustaining schools for all students.** Specifically, funding should be allocated and incentives put in place for states to target the following.
  - **People:** Invest in robust family and student engagement programs and bilingual parent support specialists.
  - **Personnel:** Increase funding for counselors, social workers, nurses, school psychologists, and other mental and behavioral health professionals trained to support student and adult needs in school communities.
  - **Programs and Practices:** Expand the use of research- and evidence-based programs and practices that create stronger, culturally-sustaining schools and increase student academic success, attendance and self-concept.
- Congress should ensure the federally-funded equity assistance centers are well-resourced and operated by experienced organizations that understand and follow the spirit of the landmark civil rights laws that gave birth to the centers. As the only federally-funded training and technical assistance providers focused specifically on civil rights, equity assistance centers can help to support schools and education agencies as they address the harms of systemic discrimination, recent violence at the U.S. Capitol, and efforts to vilify discussing and teaching about racial justice, discrimination and systemic inequities.
- To effectively execute and monitor these changes, the U.S. Department of Education should be required to collect and publish data annually through the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC).

(cont. on Page 4)

***IDRA urges federal policymakers to invest in proven strategies that expand student and family leadership in education policy and practice, particularly during this time of widespread isolation between many schools and families.***

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Publication offices:  
5815 Callaghan Road, Suite 101  
San Antonio, Texas 78228  
210-444-1710; Fax 210-444-1714  
[www.idra.org](http://www.idra.org) | [contact@idra.org](mailto:contact@idra.org)

*Celina Moreno, J.D.*  
*IDRA President and CEO*  
*Newsletter Executive Editor*

*Christie L. Goodman, APR*  
*IDRA Director of Communications*  
*Newsletter Production Editor*

# Five Things to Know about Texas School Finance

by Bricio Vasquez, Ph.D., & Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D.

You can now find your school district's funding breakdown. Texas' school finance system is a complex series of formulas that determine how much local and state funding goes to public schools. Since IDRA's founding in 1973, IDRA has worked to make public school funding transparent and accessible. This month, we launched our new Texas School Finance Data Dashboards. The dashboards model the state and local funds that flow to each school district by Texas county and education service center region.

The first three dashboards are available now:

- The **State versus Local Share Dashboard** compares the portion of state versus local funding to school districts.
- The **Texas Bilingual Education Funding Dashboard** shows the amount of bilingual education dollars from the state, including the new dual language allotment, going to school districts.
- The **Texas Special Education Funding Dashboard** shows special education funding from the state for each Texas school district.

IDRA will release more dashboards and detailed analyses over the course of the legislative session this spring. In the meantime, here are five things to know about Texas school finance.

**1. School funding is based on student attendance.** The Texas formula uses a school's *average daily attendance* (ADA) to calculate additional weighted funds based on student and district characteristics, which creates the "weighted ADA" or WADA. This is the building block for the school finance formula and drives the amount of funds school districts receive to serve their students. Given school enrollment declines during the pandemic, schools need to have extended hold harmless funding (based on last year's attendance) to get through this school year and to prepare for the next.

**2. School funding is still a matter of where you live.** With state funds provided through House Bill 3 (passed in 2019), high property-wealth school districts can tax residents at lower rates, while poorer school districts have to tax at higher rates to get the same funding. Residents in low property-wealth school districts actually pay more in school taxes relative to their tax base. This is an ongoing source of inequity in the state school finance system.

**3. Only one in five emergent bilingual (English learner) students is served in a dual language bilingual education program.** The new dual language allotment established in 2019

(cont. on Page 4)

*Even with the monies provided through HB 3, the lack of equitable and adequate funding for excellent public schools continues to be a central civil rights concern.*

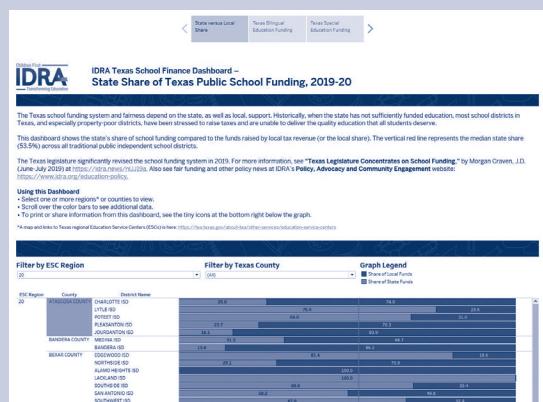
## See IDRA's New Texas School Finance Dashboards!

The system for funding Texas schools is complex. IDRA works to make school funding information accessible to communities and relevant to state policymakers. IDRA is available to provide school finance data analysis at the state or district-level to help communities and lawmakers understand how different policy proposals will impact their districts. This month, IDRA launched our new Texas School Finance Dashboards, featuring:

- ✓ **State Share of Texas Public School Funding**
- ✓ **Bilingual Education Funding**
- ✓ **Special Education Funding**

More dashboards will go live soon!

<https://idra.news/SFdata>



(Five Things to Know about Texas School Finance, continued from Page 3)

serves only one fifth of emergent bilingual students but takes up more than one third of the total bilingual education allotment. The bilingual education allotment is an important tool to protect the civil rights of emergent bilingual students. We must make sure that limited funds flow to educating the students who need it most.

**4. Over 10% of Texas students receive special education services.** State funding for special education increased under HB 3, but is still not at the level needed. Students receiving these services require immediate educational assistance due to the pandemic.

**5. Public schools remain underfunded.** Though the legislature invested \$6.5 billion in

new funds for the school finance system in 2019 through HB 3, it barely made up for the education cuts state leaders made in 2011. Since then, schools have experienced rising enrollment and increasing costs to provide a basic education, though the state does not adjust for inflation. State lawmakers should make adjustments to safeguard the future of education for Texas children.

Even with the monies provided through HB 3, the lack of equitable and adequate funding for excellent public schools continues to be a central civil rights concern (Craven, 2019). See IDRA's Texas priority brief, "Fair Funding for Strong Public School Education," for more information and recommendations for the Texas legislature.

### Resources

Calabrese Barton, A., & Tan, E. (2020). Beyond Equity as Inclusion: A Framework of "Rightful Presence" for Guiding Justice-oriented Studies in Teaching and Learning, *Educational Researcher*.

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Bricio Vasquez, Ph.D., is IDRA's education data scientist. *Comments and questions may be directed to him via email at bricio.vasquez@idra.org.* Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., is IDRA's deputy director of policy. *Comments and questions may be directed to her via e-mail at chloe.sikes@idra.org.*

(What Students Need from the Biden Administration, continued from Page 2)

### Ensure Excellent Educational Opportunities for Emergent Bilingual Students

Emergent bilingual students (often referred to as English learners) represent about 10% of all students in the country, but often they are missing from conversations about educational equity and federal funding, monitoring and civil rights protections. IDRA urges federal policymakers to do the following.

- **Continue to meet with civil rights and education equity organizations that focus on emergent bilingual students to develop a comprehensive platform of federal policies and a national network of federally-funded centers to improve educational opportunities for emergent bilingual students.**
- **Increase formula grant funding in Title III of ESSA**, which provides federal funds to states to serve emergent bilingual students, offer teacher training, and foster family and community engagement programs.
- **Strengthen the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA)** and the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition through increased funding and personnel.

### Center Students and Families in Educational Leadership

IDRA recommends that federal policymakers invest in proven strategies that expand student and family leadership in education policy and practice, particularly during this time of widespread isolation between many schools and families.

Specifically, IDRA recommends that policymakers do the following.

- **Urge Congress to immediately increase funding for Title I, Title III and other programs that support students and family engagement programs.** Additional grant funding will help school districts plan and implement local strategies for ensuring student and family engagement.
- **Use grant funding to incentivize community-based school district governance and accountability strategies.** These funds can be distributed through the U.S. Department of Education to support local accountability teams – made up of parents, students, educators and other community stakeholders – that are charged with developing plans to improve educational quality and access, collect data, and review and enforce implementation of strategies (Robledo Montecel, August 2011).

See IDRA's letter for more details on these and other policy recommendations and news at our Federal Education Advocacy website ([www.idra.org/education\\_policy/federal-education-advocacy](http://www.idra.org/education_policy/federal-education-advocacy)). Should you have any questions, contact Morgan Craven, J.D., National Director of Policy, Advocacy, and Community Engagement at [morgan.craven@idra.org](mailto:morgan.craven@idra.org).

### Resources

Robledo Montecel, M. (August 2011). IDRA Calls for Greater Federal Role in Education to Increase Excellence and Equity, *IDRA Newsletter*.

Morgan Craven, J.D., is the IDRA National Director of Policy. *Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at morgan.craven@idra.org.*

*Federal education policies impact funding for schools that serve marginalized students, enforcement of critical civil rights protections, and important data collection requirements.*

# IDRA's Top Policy Priorities for the Texas Legislative Session

by Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D.

The Texas legislative session that opened in January is filled with hearings on hundreds of bills in a race to make new laws, revise old ones and defeat harmful ones before the session's clock runs out in May. However, this year, the state's leaders announced they will narrow the bills they consider for a vote. IDRA will focus on seven policy priorities summarized below.

## Support a State Strategic Plan for Bilingual Education

English learners (or emergent bilingual students) have experienced some of the toughest learning challenges during the pandemic. And previous policy changes to funding and programs for educating bilingual students never fully addressed what schools need to serve them (Craven, 2019).

IDRA supports the creation of a state strategic plan for emergent bilingual student education. The plan should include expanding programs that cultivate bilingualism and biliteracy, such as dual language programs, rather than just English acquisition. IDRA also supports replacing the term "English learner" with "emergent bilingual" in state and local policies to recognize the value of bilingualism. Changing the language can have a significant impact on evolving the attitudes and educational approaches of districts and communities.

## Increase Student Engagement During the Pandemic and Address the Digital Divide

Schools have had to make significant adjustments in the ways they teach and support students in response to COVID-19. Texas needs a long-term state broadband plan for remote learning with a special focus on our most vulnerable communities. IDRA also urges state policymakers to invest in programs and personnel that foster strong student and family engagement in schools to help them listen to the communities most impacted by the pandemic.

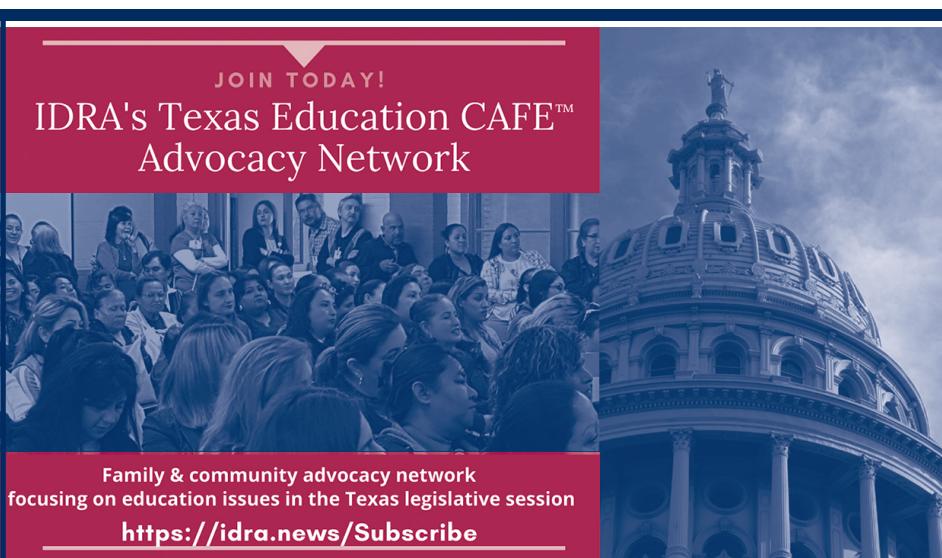
Remote education during the pandemic highlighted stark educational inequities in funding and other technological resources. About 34% of households across Texas do not have access to broadband internet (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Students without internet access have a tough time accessing materials from teachers, completing homework and feeling connected with their peers. For these and other reasons, school engagement with students and families decreased during the pandemic.

## Uphold School Funding Promises Made in House Bill 3 in 2019

IDRA urges state lawmakers to extend hold harmless provisions in HB 3 for the 2020-21 (cont. on Page 6)

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IDRA's Texas Education CAFE™ Advocacy Network



Family & community advocacy network focusing on education issues in the Texas legislative session

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IDRA's family leadership in education process, Education CAFE™, supports parents and caregivers to understand and influence public school policy and practice. This spring, families in Texas will have various opportunities to inform legislators and staff about their priorities, needs and hopes for the education of their children, from birth through college graduation. Now more than ever, policymakers need to hear from the very people their decisions will impact. We invite families and community advocates to join our family and community advocacy network. Start by signing up to receive our new email alerts (available in English and Spanish).

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(IDRA's Top Policy Priorities for the Texas Legislative Session, continued from Page 5)

school year and ensure programs serving emergent bilingual students, students who receive special education services, and students from households with limited incomes do not suffer any funding cuts. See IDRA's statement, "Texas Must Fulfill its Funding Promises to Public Schools" (2020).

### **Create Equitable Access and Support in College**

All students should get an education that prepares them for college, regardless of whether or not they choose to attend. Previous legislation (HB 5 in 2013) weakened graduation requirements in ways that now exclude many students from the courses they need to be college-ready (Bojorquez, 2018).

Policymakers should revise high school graduation pathways and requirements to ensure all students receive rigorous curriculum, including Algebra 2, for college readiness. The state should also provide additional supports for counselor-student ratios, counselor compensation and required training.

### **End Harmful Discipline and Promote Better Data Practices to Measure Discipline**

For far too long, school discipline systems have made classrooms unsafe for many Black students and Latino students. IDRA supports prohibiting harmful discipline practices, like corporal punishment. IDRA promotes enhanced data metrics and collection about school discipline. This means reducing the interactions between school police officers and students and limiting disciplinary referrals for students.

Instead, we support positive school practices, such as targeted behavioral supports based on student needs, increased trained mental and behavioral health professionals in schools, and improved data on discretionary referrals that students receive for non-criminal behavior.

### **Use Substantive Assessments for Interim Options and Pause Punitive Accountability Ratings**

IDRA supports temporarily canceling the yearly standardized exam assessments, such as STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness) and TELPAS (Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System), in favor of district administration of interim assessments throughout the year. Test scores provide one

measure of student learning, which is important for comparing yearly progress and changes.

Just as we use tests to assess student learning, the state uses test scores to hold schools and districts accountable for educating students. The Texas accountability system however overly relies on test scores without considering many other metrics about students' opportunities to learn. That is why IDRA supports the Texas Education Agency's decision to pause A-F accountability ratings this school year (2020-21) (TEA, 2020), and why we continue to push for changes to the accountability system that support students and schools. See IDRA's statement, "Effective School Assessments and Accountability that Does Not Hurt Students" (Latham Sikes, 2020).

### **Defend Against Charter and Voucher Expansion**

IDRA supports keeping public funds in public schools. Public dollars should be channeled to the schools that are accountable to the public and not privately-run.

IDRA recommends policymakers guard against the expansion of charters, private virtual school networks and voucher programs and instead invest in a robust broadband infrastructure that addresses systemic issues that impact equitable access to education.

IDRA develops our policy priorities based on research, community input, and with our coalition partners (such as the Texas Legislative Education Equity Coalition). IDRA staff and policy fellows will advocate equitable public education policies during the session. To get policy updates and ways to get involved in our advocacy work, you can stay tuned here, through our email alerts (<https://idra.news/Subscribe>) or on social media (<https://www.idra.org/who-we-are/idra-social-media/>).

### **Resources**

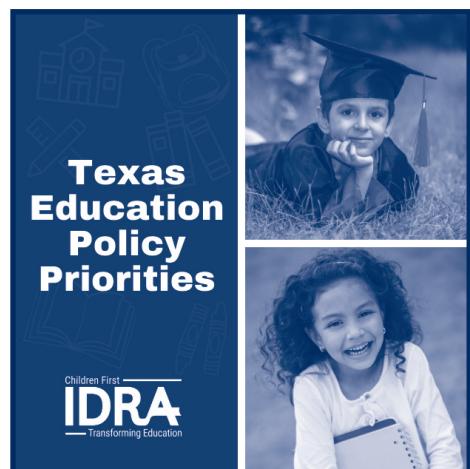
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Visit IDRA's education policy website to see IDRA's full recommendation letter to the Biden administration and other resources: [www.idra.org/education\\_policy](http://www.idra.org/education_policy)

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Charge 2: Evaluate Ongoing Costs Associated with Implementation of HB 3 (86, R).

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Vasquez, B. (November-December 2019). Texas Higher Education Law Aims to Improve Outcomes for Students in Developmental Education, *IDRA Newsletter*.

*Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., is IDRA's deputy director of policy. Comments and questions may be directed to her via e-mail at chloe.sikes@idra.org.*

# IDRA and Partners Release Policy Roadmap to Ensure Emergent Bilinguals Are Strong Readers by Third Grade

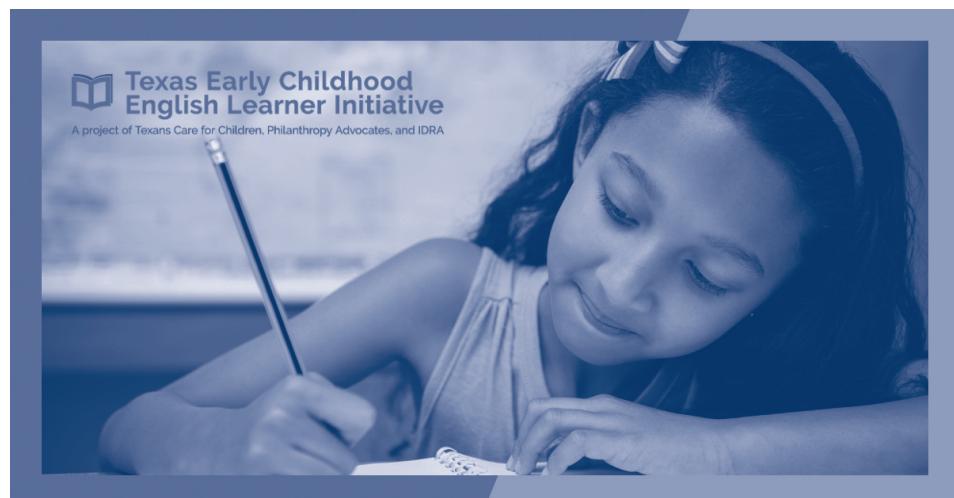
A number of organizations in the Texas Early Childhood English Learner Initiative, including IDRA, released a policy roadmap with recommendations for ways the state legislature, state agencies, school districts and child care centers can support English learner (or “emergent bilingual”) students. The initiative’s goals are to ensure emergent bilinguals...

- become strong readers by third grade,
- become fluent and literate in both English and their home language, and
- learn in settings where educators and parents have the tools to support them during this precious period of childhood.

The initiative is led by a steering committee composed of Texans Care for Children; IDRA; Philanthropy Advocates, a collaboration with Educate Texas; Texas Association for the Education of Young Children (TAEYC); and Dr. Dina Castro of the University of North Texas (UNT) at Denton.

The recommendations stem from a statewide survey of 185 experts in bilingual and early childhood education, three virtual workgroup convenings with community leaders from around the state, and numerous conversations with education program leaders and stakeholders. The initiative’s website, [bilingualtexas.org](http://bilingualtexas.org), provides a policy roadmap with recommendations for improving the quality of early learning programs, strengthening the workforce, collecting better data and retooling school finance.

“To make the most of the great steps the legislature took on pre-K last session, we need to have smart strategies in place for educating English learners,” said Jennifer Esterline, director of Philanthropy Advocates, formerly known as TEGAC. “The recommendations we’re releasing – based on months of listening to educators, researchers and other experts – will help the Legislature meet its goal of ensuring Texas kids are strong readers by third grade.”



[bilingualtexas.org](http://bilingualtexas.org)

In 2019, the Legislature passed a major school finance bill, HB 3, that included provisions to fund full-day prekindergarten for eligible students and to expand the use of dual language programs to improve students’ reading ability by third grade. Emergent bilinguals account for 28% of students in pre-K through third grade in Texas public schools.

“English learners’ path to graduation starts when they first walk into an early childhood classroom, but only one in 12 emergent bilingual students graduates college-ready in this state,” said Celina Moreno, President and CEO of IDRA. “Improving Texas policies for young English learners is especially urgent now that the COVID-19 pandemic has socially isolated children and interrupted student learning, especially in early grades.”

During the COVID-19 pandemic, not only is online learning more difficult for the youngest students, but many students in early grades have not even enrolled in school. The Texas Education Agency recently reported that pre-K enrollment declined 22% during the first semester of the current school year.

“Use of students’ two languages to support their development and learning is most effective, and this means that dual language education should be expanded,” said Dr. Dina Castro of UNT Denton. “The fact is that early childhood is the time when the brain is best equipped to acquire two or more languages, thus, access to bilingual learning should begin then.”

## Recommendations

The report’s recommendations to the Legislature include creating a state strategic plan to cultivate bilingualism across all early learning systems; adopting a uniform process across early childhood systems to identify English learner children and collect data; creating a teacher certification in bilingual special education; and updating school finance formulae to reflect the cost of educating emergent bilingual students.

The report also offers recommendations to TEA and other state agencies, including the recommendation to continue to identify emergent bilinguals in the state’s education database after they exit a bilingual education or ESL program in order to better track their progress and evaluate the efficacy of different strategies.

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*(IDRA and Partners Release Policy Roadmap to Ensure Emergent Bilinguals Are Strong Readers by Third Grade, continued from Page 7)*

The report recommends that schools and child care providers recognize bilingualism and biliteracy as strengths and implement research-based teaching practices that support their development; work to recruit, hire, retain and promote bilingual and multilingual staff; and take other steps outlined in the report.

Recommendations to schools include expanding the use of dual language programs, which have proven more effective than other programs and models for emergent bilingual, and instituting student progress monitoring that goes beyond measuring English proficiency.

"If you're trying to make sure Texas is smart about pre-K and smart about growing strong readers in elementary school, then one of the first things you need to do is look at the research about how to effectively serve the large number of English learners in these grades," said David Feigen, Early Childhood Policy Associate at Texans Care for Children. "We want to make sure schools are helping kids master English and their home

language, recognizing that their bilingualism is an asset for themselves, for their school, and ultimately for our state as we compete in a multilingual economy."

Experiences in early childhood set the foundation for success in school and in life.

"If policymakers want kids to do well in elementary school, they need to make sure the state has strong child care policies in place," said Kim Kofron, executive director of the TAEYC. "We're excited to work with state leaders and child care directors to pursue these recommendations and make the most of the early years for English learners."

For more information on the Texas Early Childhood English Learner Initiative and to see the policy roadmap, visit [bilingualtexas.org](http://bilingualtexas.org).